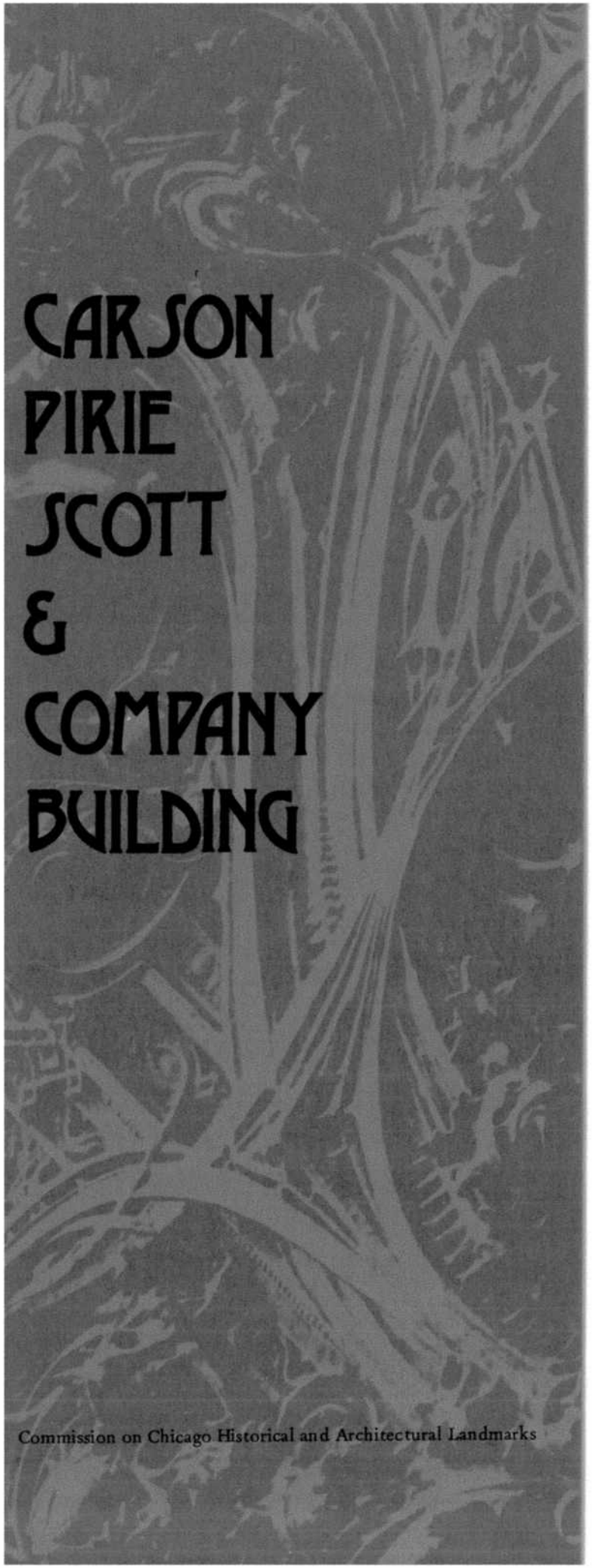


Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks

CARSON PIRIE SCOTT & CO. BUILDING

One South State Street
Louis H. Sullivan, architect
1899, 1903-04
1906 addition by D. H. Burnham and Company

Designated a Chicago Landmark on November 5, 1970.

The Carson Pirie Scott & Company building ranks as one of the most important structures in early modern architecture. It incisively expresses the building technology that emerged in Chicago during the 1880s and 90s, a technology that provided the basis for steel-frame high-rise construction. The building illustrates Louis Sullivan's philosophy of, and genius for, architectural ornament. The Carson Pirie Scott store is considered by many to be Sullivan's greatest masterpiece and one of the finest examples of commercial architecture anywhere in the world.

Retail Development in Chicago

From the first days of its settlement, Chicago provided a profitable atmosphere for the growth of commerce and industry. By the 1850s downtown streets were already crowded with small buildings, most of them wooden, housing stores and service establishments. Wholesale activities gradually concentrated along South Water Street while retail outlets tended to locate along Lake Street. There was little question that the commercial center of Chicago was at Clark and Lake, where it remained until the late 1860s.

The emergence of State Street as a center of retail activity was sudden and dramatic. In the mid-1860s, according to historians Harold M. Mayer and Richard C. Wade, State was "narrow, shoddy, and unpromising." Where land sold for $2,000 a front foot near Clark and Lake, it went for less than $200 on State.

In 1867, all this began to change as Potter Palmer, a retail and wholesale businessman so successful he was dubbed the "merchant prince of Chicago," went into real estate. Palmer purchased property extending three-quarters of a mile on State and substantially transformed the area within two years. He used his influence to have the street widened, replaced the shacks near Monroe with a luxury hotel bearing his name, and persuaded retailers Field, Leiter and Company to move away from Lake Street and into a new State Street store which he then had built for them.

Linda Legner, *writer*
John Hern, *designer*
Harriet McShane, *production assistant*
Meredith Taussig, *project coordinator*

By 1869, State Street had become the city's prime retail address and, as Mayer and Wade relate, Chicago's commercial axis was reoriented from an east-west stretch along the river to the north-south alignment that predominates today. The great fire of 1871 totally destroyed the downtown business district, yet as the city rebuilt, State Street was quickly restored as the dominant retail center. Those dry goods and small retail firms that had remained on Lake before the fire reopened on State during reconstruction.

The Owners

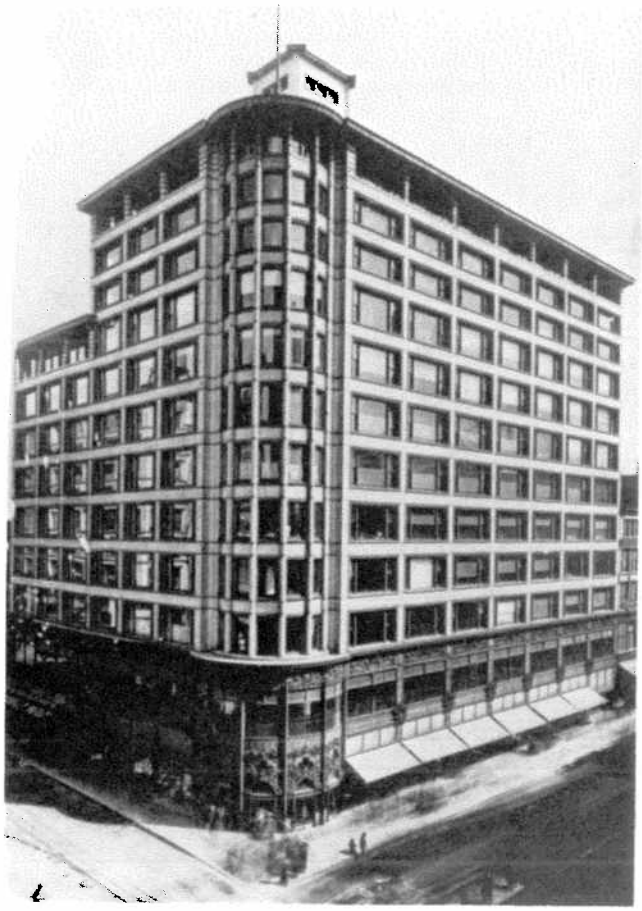
Schlesinger and Mayer, one of the city's earliest department stores, was founded in 1872 by Leopold Schlesinger and Daniel Mayer, both businessmen from Germany. The firm remained at the corner of State and Madison for over thirty years before the partners sold their interests to Carson Pirie Scott & Company in 1904.

John Pirie, born in Scotland in 1827, went to Ireland at fifteen to work in his uncle's dry goods store at Newry. There he met Samuel Carson and, as their friendship grew, the two decided to move to Belfast where they could enjoy broader business opportunities. The young men had just paid six months rent on their own dry goods store when an acquaintance told them of his flourishing commercial venture in Peru, Illinois. Carson and Pirie decided then to come to America, and in 1855 they opened a store in LaSalle, about 100 miles southwest of Chicago. Business prospered and operations were soon set up in Amboy, Polo, and Mendota as well.

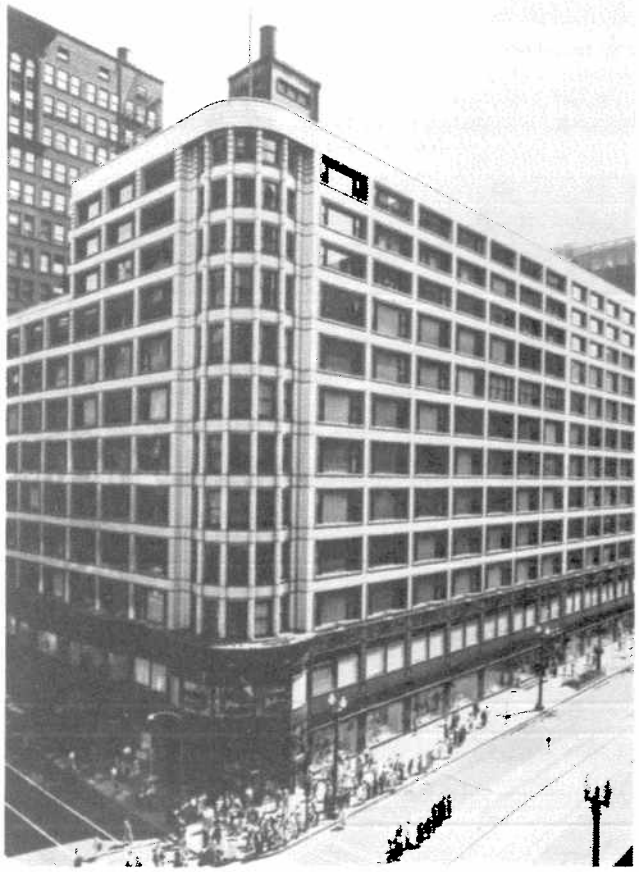
Sometime during the Civil War, Carson and Pirie established a wholesale store in Chicago, and by the mid-sixties they also had a retail store on Lake Street. George and Robert Scott, who operated the downstate outlets, were eventually brought to Chicago, and the firm was consolidated under its present name.

Both Schlesinger and Mayer and Carson Pirie Scott commissioned parts of the architectural masterpiece at State and Madison. Schlesinger and Mayer originated the project and chose Sullivan as architect. Carson Pirie Scott has conscientiously maintained the original structure and sensitively requested that later additions (five bays on State in 1906 by architects D. H. Burnham & Company, and three bays on State as late as 1960 by the firm of Holabird & Root) adhere to Sullivan's initial design scheme. The result is a series of well-integrated units that express a generally consistent design theme and material selection.

This photograph of the Carson Pirie Scott & Company Store was taken shortly after Sullivan's addition was completed. The original Schlesinger and Mayer store is seen at the left side of the photograph.



In 1906, an addition to the State Street side of the building was designed by D.H. Burnham and Company. The cornice and the columns on the top floor were removed in 1948 and replaced with a plain parapet.
(Richard Nickel, photographer)



The Building

Schlesinger and Mayer's first building at State and Madison was designed in 1873 by W. W. Boyington. By 1891, the store was far too cramped, and the firm therefore engaged Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan to prepare sketches for an addition, as well as a uniform facade for both old and new structures. A severe economic depression in 1893 delayed the project for six more years, and it was not until 1899 that plans finally went ahead. Schlesinger and Mayer now had in mind an entirely new store. Adler and Sullivan had dissolved their partnership in the interim, and the retailers now selected Sullivan alone as their architect.

Sullivan first produced drawings for a segment three bays wide and nine stories high which was erected on Madison just east of State. This unit was enlarged in 1903-04 with a twelve-story extension that continued west another three bays to the intersection of State and Madison, then rounded the corner with one curved bay and added seven bays on State Street.

Carson Pirie Scott & Company purchased the business from Schlesinger and Mayer in 1904. In 1906, they hired D. H. Burnham and Company to expand yet again. (Sullivan, alive until 1924, was not rehired. Research does not provide a definite explanation of this rather curious decision.) Burnham added five more bays, south along State Street, continuing the same twelve-story height. He followed closely Sullivan's previous design, altering only the treatment of the top story.

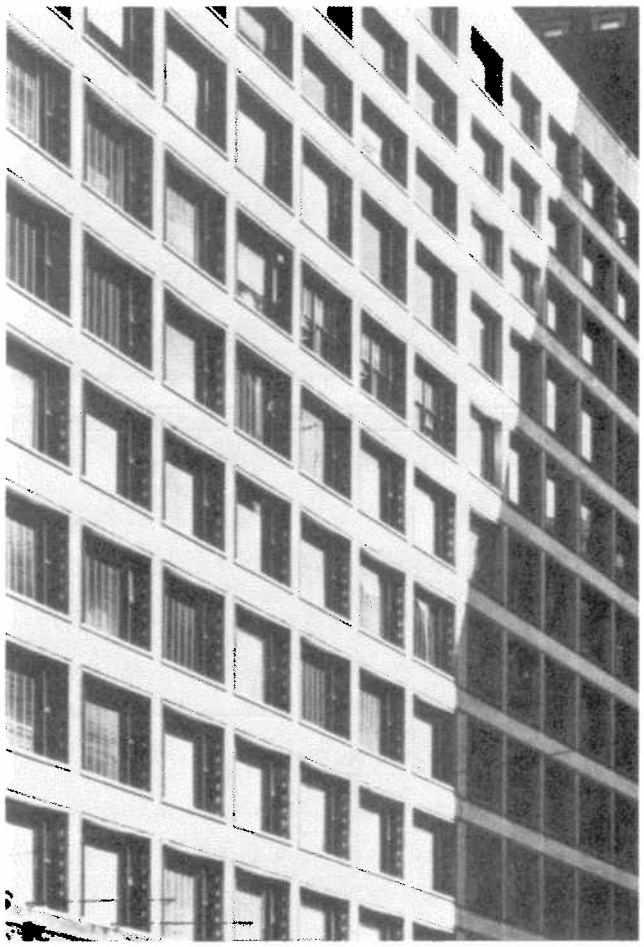
Department stores had, of course, existed for many years before Carsons was built, yet it was Sullivan who gave this particular building type the form we so readily identify today. The store is essentially a steel-framed structure based directly on the technological precedents of the Chicago school of architecture. The basic configuration was determined by the desire to display merchandise in large unobstructed spaces and by the need for maximum admission of natural light to those spaces. Therefore, the frame was constructed on a rather generous grid and filled with exceptionally large windows. This type of window is called a "Chicago window" because it originated here. Unlike a traditional double-hung system, a Chicago window consists of a large central fixed pane with one narrower double-hung window on each side.

In many respects, Sullivan produced an interior design not unlike that of a warehouse. Throughout the building the floors are open spaces, interrupted only by the grid of uniformly placed columns which house the steel interior supports. But Sullivan's sense of scale, proportion, and an extremely imaginative use of highly original ornament transformed the building from something commonplace to a work of art, illuminating the difference between warehousing and merchandising.

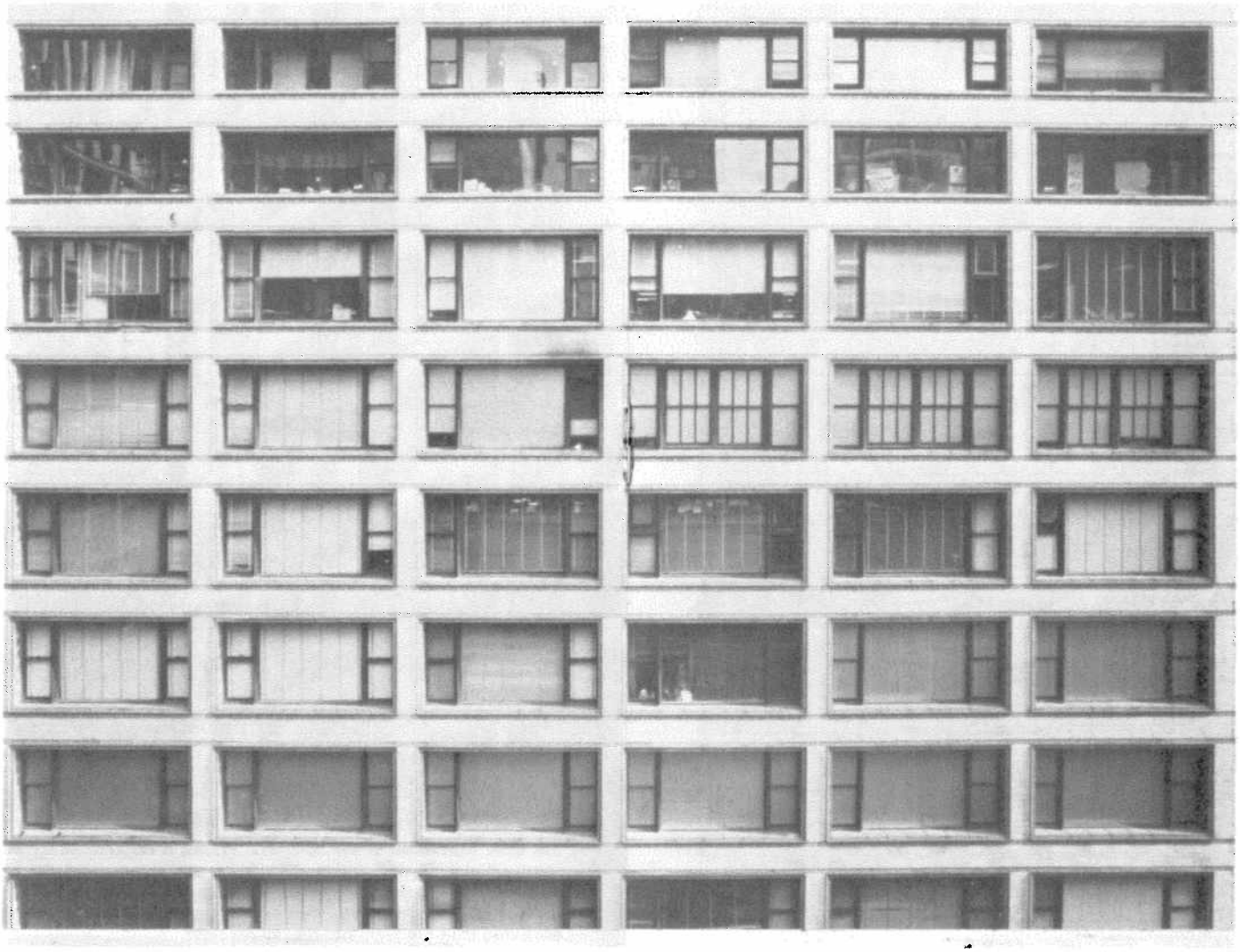
Although Sullivan designed in a thoroughly contemporary vein, his buildings can nevertheless be characterized



This detail of the cast-iron ornament above the doors at the corner of State and Madison shows the complexity of Sullivan's designs.



The clear expression of the structural system is emphasized by the depth of the window recess. The frame around each window is decorated with terra cotta. The seven bays to the left half of this photograph are part of the 1904 addition and are more elaborately decorated than the 1906 addition to the right.



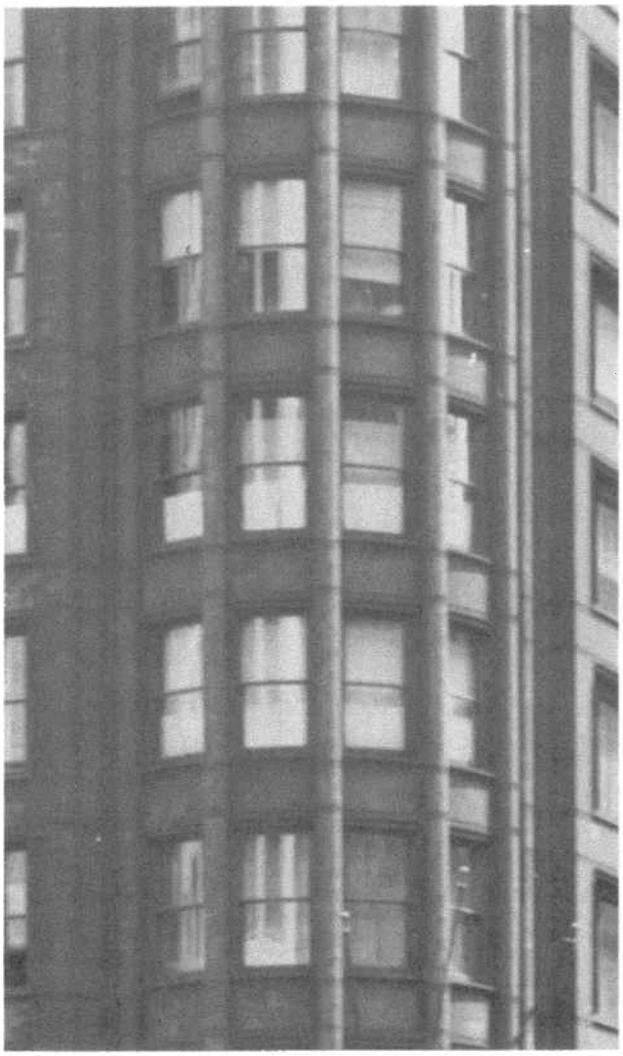
The crisp lines of terra-cotta sheathing delineate the repetitive grid pattern of the steel frame. Wide structural bays allowed the installation of exceptionally large Chicago windows.
(Richard Nickel, photographer)

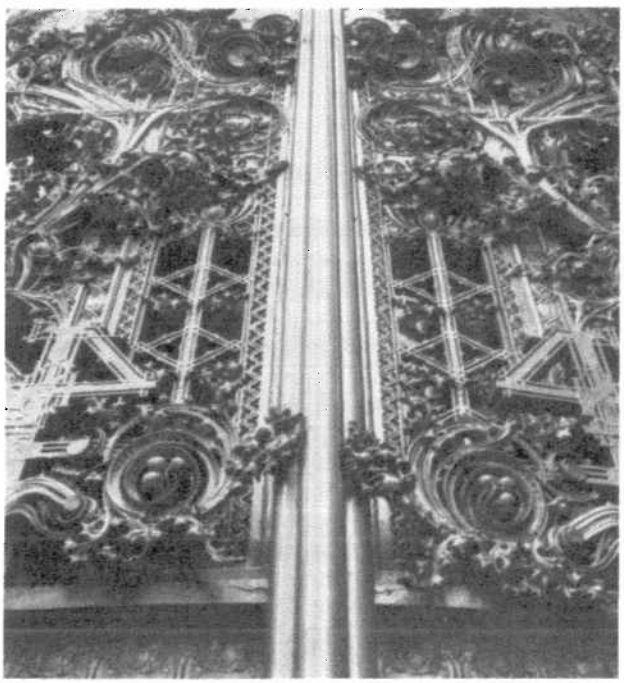
by a base/shaft/capital configuration, a concept learned during his classical training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Each element of this tripartite formula was significant; however the base took on exceptional importance, because it was the most visually prominent to the passer-by. The base of the Carson Pirie Scott store not only had to delight the casual pedestrian, but it also had to entice the shopper.

To accomplish these ends, Sullivan surrounded the huge display windows of the first two stories with cast iron, molded into lavish, delicate, ornamental patterns. Leaves, berries, flowers, vines, and geometric forms intertwine to produce a rich and decorative window frame that arrests the eye and sets off the merchandise within. Because the large windows above the base were often used for display, this same framing approach was continued on the upper floors, although here the design was carried out in terra cotta.

Sullivan made conceptual sketches for the elaborate ornamentation which were refined by the architect George Grant Elmslie, who was Sullivan's chief draftsman at the time. The pencil drawings were then translated into plaster molds by Kristian Schneider, a sculptor who worked with Sullivan for twenty years, modeling nearly all the ornament for execution in iron, terra cotta, or plaster for buildings dating from the Auditorium of 1889 to the Midwest banks that Sullivan designed during the last years of his career. Finished iron casting was performed by the Winslow Brothers Company; the terra-cotta casting was produced by the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company.

The cast iron was originally painted red and overlaid with a coat of green which allowed the red to show through in an attempt to imitate the color of authentic oxidized bronze. The ironwork was gilded for Carson's centennial celebration in 1955 and painted a uniform black the following year. The ironwork was painted gray in 1962,





but in 1979 the original colors were restored.

If the base explores the picturesque through its ornament, the upper stories, sheathed in thin tiles of white terra cotta, exploit the aesthetic possibilities of technology. The great cellular elevations energetically reveal the enormous steel frame that carries the building. The beautifully proportioned rectangles are systematically and repetitively presented to create a bold, rhythmic procession that bespeaks strength and control. Every detail, like the carefully calculated depth of the window reveals, adds to the clarity, force, and grace of the building.

While Sullivan's tall office buildings express verticality, the Carson Pirie Scott store expressed a definite horizontality. The horizontal alignment of the long Chicago windows and the skeleton is consciously emphasized by the ornamental bands which extend continuously along the sill and lintel lines.

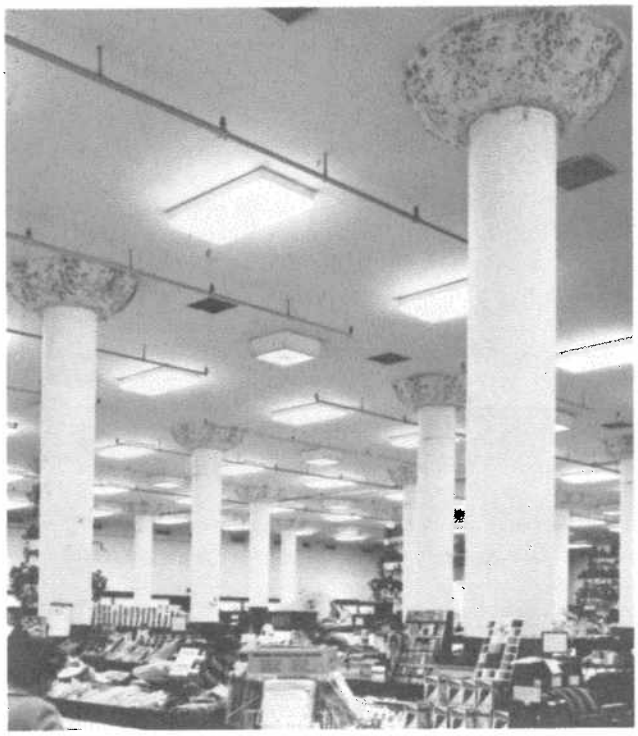
Sullivan is almost universally praised for the cylindrical main entry pavilion located where the building rounds the corner at State and Madison, but the rounded corner is possibly less a stroke of architectural brilliance and more a client request. Schlesinger and Mayer's old building had a pavilion corner, as did many buildings of the time, including, for example, the old Palmer House. This was certainly not an unusual intersection treatment, and Sullivan probably deferred to the client in providing a reminiscence of the past.

An overhanging roof slab or cornice originally terminated the building (again the return to the base/shaft/capital formula). This cornice was regrettably removed and replaced with a parapet in 1948, and when that change was undertaken, the window treatment of the top floor was also altered. These windows had previously been substantially recessed behind columns which created a modest arcade effect. When the parapet was installed, the columns were eliminated and the windows brought out to a plane flush with the glass on other floors. The entire alteration, unfortunately, was in no way an improvement over the original design.

Other elements, particularly those of a decorative nature, have been removed over the years. The flamboyant cast-iron emblems with a script S&M which adorned the first-floor piers are now gone. The furnishings and mosaic floor of the main entrance, as well as the ornate iron flower garlands which concealed the support chains on the Madison Street canopy, have also disappeared. Handsome metal stairway balusters were taken from the building during an interior renovation. Though some still remain, many of the pieces were installed in the balustrade of the main staircase in Chicago's Art Institute.

The curved corner at State and Madison, with curved piers running from the third floor to the roofline, calls attention to the building *(top left).*

The curved lines of the corner extend down to the base where the entry pavilion is covered with rich geometric and foliate ornament. Sullivan's initials, LHS, were worked into the design and may be seen at the lower left and right sides of this photograph *(bottom left).*
(Richard Nickel, photographer)



Expansive interiors are interrupted only by columns and fire walls. The capitals of the columns are decorated with plaster ornament.
(Richard Nickel, photographer)

When the officers of Carson Pirie Scott began planning for the latest addition in 1960, they decided to retain the original building theme, a decision that testifies to the functional validity of Sullivan's design, and to the respect the company has for its landmark. Architects Holabird & Root carried out the commission, completed in 1961. This eight-story addition, three bays wide, follows almost exactly the dimensions and decorative patterns of the 1906 addition. The process used to duplicate the ornamental designs was a difficult and time-consuming one, because the original molds could not be located. Numerous layers of paint were first carefully scraped off a typical base segment. A new mold was then made from this exposed metal and the ornament cast in aluminum rather than iron.

While the 1961 addition was going up, Carsons also began exterior renovation of the first two levels of Sullivan's building under the direction of the company's staff architect, Mason Walker. The cast iron was thoroughly cleaned and repainted, and a projecting belt course above the second story was replaced. The ornament for this was duplicated from a mold recast from a similar belt course on the corner pavilion.

The Carson Pirie Scott store was Sullivan's last large commercial building, and after this assignment his career declined rapidly. In the last twenty years of his life, Sullivan designed fewer than twenty buildings: small stores and offices (including the Krause Music Store, designated a Chicago Landmark on September 28, 1977), two residences, a church, and a series of small exquisite bank buildings, which have often been referred to as "jewel box" banks. All these commissions were located in the Midwest.

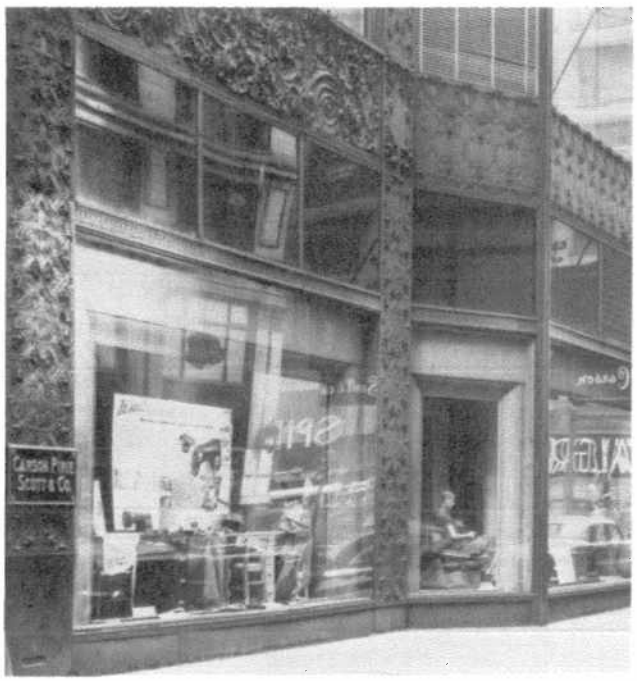
If things did not go well in later years, at least the Carson Pirie Scott store remains as a testament to Sullivan's creative ability. It unites his propensity for sumptuous ornament with the Chicago school ethic of discipline and order. The interior spaces are so flexible that the store has continued to operate efficiently with only modest interior remodeling since 1899. The Carson Pirie Scott store clearly meets the challenge of the Chicago tradition with vigor, sophistication, and inventive artistic accomplishment.

Louis Sullivan

Louis Henri Sullivan was born in Boston in 1856. His early years were divided between school in Boston and long summers on his grandparents' farm near South Reading. He was a good student, and as he grew older he enjoyed reading on all topics, including poetry, philosophy, and scientific thought. He spent many hours as a boy wandering the streets of Boston, learning its layout and analyzing its buildings; this gave him the inspiration to become an architect. But it was his grandparents' farm and his time in the country that instilled a deep respect for nature: its power, rhythms, dignity, and meaning.

Although his parents moved to Chicago in 1869, Sullivan remained on the East Coast and entered the architectural school at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in September, 1872. His restless, inquisitive personality found the school completely uncongenial, and he stayed only a year before leaving for Philadelphia to try his hand in architectural practice. He entered the office of Frank Furness, whose style greatly influenced him. A serious economic

Ornamental cast iron creates a lavish frame around the large ground floor display windows.
(Aaron Siskind, photographer)



depression forced Sullivan to leave the employ of Furness in November, 1873; so he traveled to Chicago to join his parents for a brief visit. Excited by the prospect of reconstruction following the devastating 1871 fire, he decided to stay on and took a job as draftsman with architect William Le Baron Jenney for several months.

In July, 1874, Sullivan set sail for Paris and training at the renowned Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Though he enjoyed his time in Paris, Sullivan was dissatisfied with the architectural program at the Ecole. The emphasis on historical styles disturbed him, and feeling that the school could not offer him enough, he returned to Chicago in 1875.

He took a job with architects Johnston and Edelman, remaining there until 1879 when he joined the office of Dankmar Adler. Each seemed the perfect complement to the other: Adler was a brilliant and progressive engineer, Sullivan a disciplined but imaginative designer. They formed a partnership in 1881 which lasted fourteen years, a prolific and expert office.

Sullivan had formulated much of his architectural philosophy by an early age, and while his buildings illustrated his beliefs, it wasn't until he dissolved his partnership that he seriously began to put his principles into writing in such works as *Kindergarten Chats, The Autobiography of an Idea, A System of Architectural Ornament According with a Philosophy of Man's Powers,* and many essays which were read or printed in architectural circles. Sullivan was a romantic, with the true spirit of a poet. He sought throughout his practice to create an architecture that was universal, that linked technology and art. He expected a great deal of himself and of all architects. In *Kindergarten Chats* he discusses what characterizes a "real" architect. "First of all, a poetic imagination; second, a broad sympathy, humane character, common sense and a thoroughly disciplined mind; third, a perfected technique; and finally, an abundant and gracious gift of expression."

Sullivan felt that architecture had to be natural, intuitive, and inspired by nature. It had to evolve from and express the environment from which it grew and be adaptive. A good building had to be truthful to its structure and purpose, to seek expression in ornament based on nature.

Architecture for him was the expression of man's spirit, his power, will, and emotion. It was to serve all men, and therefore Sullivan pursued designs that would be "democratic" in nature. He sought to lessen the influence of historical styles by generating a truly American architecture.

Sullivan united structural technique, ornamentation, function, and appropriateness to the time and surroundings. His buildings were simple, rational, agressive statements; his ornament complex, sensuous, and highly subjective. "On the Carson store," architectural historian Carl Condit writes, "the lavish ornament of the screenlike base combined with the powerful cellular wall above it leads to a feminine ambiguity. They are both necessary for the fulfilment of Sullivan's architectural myth."

Sullivan was attuned to the scientific ideas of his age and was driven to express them within his art. His architecture celebrates technology while it lays open a world of dreams. Few have been able to equal his impact.

The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from those qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. As part of this study, the Commission's staff prepare detailed documentation on each potential landmark. This public information brochure is a synopsis of various research materials compiled as part of the designation prodecure.



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